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ABSTRACT

A case study examined the brief conversations about writing that took place between a high school English teacher and two of his students. One illustrative writing conference conversation lasting 1 minute and 19 seconds shows how, through the push and pull of their short exchange, student and teacher simultaneously read the book, read the writing assignment, and read each other, revising their "readings" along the way. Another such conference between the teacher and a different student, lasting 1 minute and 1 second, illustrates how the student examined a rhetorical strategy that had begun to look problematic and worked through a solution that confirmed her original plans. Because he has limited amounts of time in which to converse with each student, yet places high value on such talk, the teacher has adopted four strict strategies to make such conversation possible. These "ordinary" and quickly fleeting exchanges between teacher and student are critical events in the business of learning to write. (RS)

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Melanie Sperling

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HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH AND THE TEACHER-STUDENT WRITING CONFERENCE: FINE-TUNED DUETS IN THE ENSEMBLE OF THE CLASSROOM

Melanie Sperling
Stanford University

During English class, Gina, a ninth-grader, muses with her teacher over what topic to choose for her next paper, a character study of a famous person:

Gina:	I was gonna do either Robert Redford, Paul Newman, or Joan Collins. I didn't know which one to do.
Mr. Peterson:	A lot of people don't.
Gina:	Joan Collins is a little more recent than anybody else.
Mr. Peterson:	Well, Robert Redford just made a movie though. So there might be something about him in the current magazines. But not biographical stuff though, probably.
Gina:	Well yeah.
Mr. Peterson:	Somebody like Paul Newman, a lot of stuff has been written over the years about Paul Newman. But you'd have a hard time finding a current magazine that like went in depth into his personality.
Gina:	Um hm.
Mr. Peterson:	(rethinking the situation) Well, any of 'em are ok. Any of 'em. A couple of people are doing Joan Collins, so you might want-
Gina:	(interrupting) Oh really? (decisively) Oh. Ok. Yeah then, I want to be *original*.

Gina, with Mr. Peterson's input, effectively narrows her dilemma, and, in fact, she ends up writing about Paul Newman. She has opted for originality over glamor and currency for the topic of her essay after a one-minute writing conference with Mr. Peterson.

Did I say one-minute writing conference?

It is sometimes a revealing notion that the quick conversational exchanges such as the one between Gina and Mr. Peterson—which for some of us may comprise the bulk of our interactions about writing with the students in our classrooms—can be regarded, just like more deliberately scheduled and longer meetings, as teacher-student writing conferences. In my experience, it is the traditional full-dress writing conference, modeled after the college-level conference in which an instructor sets up office hours and has her composition students each come in for the twenty-minute talk that can stretch into a half-hour or more, that we we reserve for such designation. It is perhaps not so remarkable, then, that studies of secondary school writing instruction such as Applebee's in 1981 and the Freedman survey of 1987 report that teacher-student writing conferences are rare events

in secondary school classrooms, in part because teachers have precious little time for them. If even a close approximation to the college-level conference is the model, then in fact teachers do not have time or facilities for scheduling writing conference meetings.

But let me open the door for a moment onto Mr. Peterson's ninth-grade English classroom, for, robust with the chatter that surrounds writing, it offers a glimpse of how writing conferences can look amid the realities of the secondary school setting. Adding to this glimpse a close examination of some brief teacher-student conversation about writing and an interview with Mr. Peterson about how he manages such conversations in his classroom, we may begin to realize the eventfulness of "ordinary" classroom exchange.

MR. PETERSON'S NINTH-GRADE CLASSROOM

The students in Mr. Peterson's class—twenty-seven in all—reflect a diversity of backgrounds. They come from the wealthiest to the poorest of San Francisco neighborhoods, from middle-class as well as working class families. They come as descendents in long lines of highly educated families and they come as the first in their families who will, after high school, get a chance at higher education. Most of the students are Asian—their families Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, representing various decades of influx from the Far East to the U.S.; some are Anglo, some Black, some Hispanic; one is Native American. Many more are female than male. They wound up together in ninth-grade English in this particular high school because in spite of their differences they have in common certain signs of academic success—good grade-point-averages from feeder middle schools and above-average scores on a standardized test of basic skills—and their high school, while a public school, is considered "academic," like a magnet school although it's not called that, selecting its cut of academically inclined students from across the city as well as enrolling all students from the surrounding neighborhood. Yet, as in most urban schools, many of these students typically have problems in English classes because English is their second language. Others have academic difficulties because, according to Mr. Peterson, their earlier high grades do not necessarily reflect their current abilities. So many of them are (if such characterization has merit) "average," in some classes "below-average," students. What we see in Mr. Peterson's classroom is, in short, a diverse group.

In spite of the uncanny and predictable knack Rhonda's locker partner has for walking off on due dates with Rhonda's books, with her binder, with phantom drafts of essays, so that Rhonda comes to class invariably unprepared, and in spite of Candace's classtime preoccupation with balancing her mirror against the books on her desk in order to watch her hair, this ninth-grade classroom is rife with language activity and language play. Several times a week these ninth-graders work together in small groups, often composing group paragraphs or short essays on people they read about in the daily newspapers and in popular magazines. Or they write individually on a common group topic. These are practice writings for the character study essays they are producing on their own over the final six weeks of the semester, the weeks I observed in their classroom. In small groups, too, they critique one another's composing. Sometimes, for example, they play group games for points, finding in their collective papers the ones with the most vivid verbs, the best transitions, the strongest supports for a thesis.

Working alone at their desks they read chapters in *Great Expectations*, privy to the lives of Pip and Estella and the others, whom they will write about for one of their character study assignments. While alone at their desks, too, they often work on their essays, drafting and revising the assignments given by a teacher who focuses the bulk of his teaching on writing and the writing process.

And often, while all this is happening, individual students talk alone with Mr. Peterson—when he stops by their small groups and catches private conversations with individual group members; when he sets up two chairs at the front or back of the room and marks, with that set-up, a private space for three or four minutes of one-to-one talk with his varied students; when he moves from one student's desk to the next, speaking in low tones about revision, about planning, about visiting the library for *Newsweek* and *Rolling Stone* for the articles that will help these ninth-graders write about the famous people they have chosen to explore for one of their character study essays. And occasionally between classes, when this activity ceases, some of the students meet alone with Mr. Peterson in the office he shares with the rest of the English department, and they have conversations, most of them not much more than five minutes long, about their writing and about the processes they are going through as they produce essays for his class.

This is a teacher who honors talk, not only students' talk with one another, but also their talk with him, a teacher who is interlocutor in twenty-seven ongoing conversations about writing that get played out over the course of a semester. It bothers him that conversation does not feel comfortable with some of the students, with the ones who don't say much, for example, or the ones who seem not to catch on to the point he's making. But these moments do not deter him from holding conversations, nonetheless, with the very students he feels least at ease with along with the ones whose conversations he looks forward to.

I examined the conversations about writing that took place between Mr. Peterson and his students (for a complete account of this research, see Sperling, 1990). In order to open windows onto these often-ignored "literacy events," conversations that occur daily along with other brief exchanges characteristic of a high school English class, let us look closely at two very different conferences occurring between Mr. Peterson and two different students in this class.

Gina

Gina appears to be a mature ninth-grader. She has been told throughout her schooling that she is a good student and a good writer, and that is the way she she thinks of herself—even though at one point during the semester Gina accumulates several absences from Mr. Peterson's class, a problem that he draws to her attention when, in a hushed voice, he tells her that she ought to try to keep her "appointments and stuff" at a time other than his classtime. Part of being in class for Gina includes sharing her ideas with other students and helping them with their writing. Yet Gina talks to Mr. Peterson mostly when he initiates conversation or joins the on-going conversation of her peer group, which is to say, she rarely initiates such conversations herself.

One illustrative writing conference conversation between Gina and Mr. Peterson lasts one minute, nineteen seconds. It occurs as Gina embarks on thinking about a first draft of writing, a paragraph-long sketch of a character in *Great Expectations*. Students work together in small groups on this assignment. Each group has been assigned one character to brainstorm about collectively, and the individual students in the group are then each to write their own paragraph about this character. The point, the lesson, is to become adept at distinguishing between fact and opinion: when the students read about their characters as Dickens presents them they need to know when the narrator, Pip, is expressing opinion or fact, and when they write their paragraphs about their assigned characters they need to make the same distinction themselves.

We come upon Gina working in her small group as she and her peers leaf through their copies of *Great Expectations*, discussing the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Hubble. Mr.

Peterson has been walking around the room, checking on different groups' progress, and having made his way to Gina's group he joins in on their talk. Gina is perplexed that she cannot find any description in *Great Expectations* that appears to resemble fact. All, she feels, is Pip's opinion:

Gina: There's—ok. There's a whole description of Mr. 'n Mrs. Hubble. There's a whole description of them here that um most of them seem to me to be um Pip's *opinion*. I mean-

Mr. Peterson: Let's see.

Gina: Somebody else may not *think* that.

Mr. Peterson: (beginning to read from Gina's copy of *Great Expectations*) "I remember Mrs. Hubble as a little curly- person."

Here their conversation is interrupted by Rhonda, another student in the group. Listening to Gina and Mr. Peterson talk, Rhonda interjects, "That's what the book is about, his opinion mostly, I mean we really don't know-". Gina appears to latch comfortably onto these echoes of her own sentiments as she, again, converses with her teacher:

Gina: But I mean it's like the whole book is opinion really.

Mr. Peterson: (to Gina) But look. This is not- (consulting the book) She's curly haired.

Gina: Ok.

Mr. Peterson: All right.

Gina: (consulting the book) She wore- she wore a sky blue outfit, (to Mr. Peterson) ok.

Mr. Peterson: Yeah, right, that's right.

Gina: Ok. (reads from the book) "Who held a conventionally juvenile position", (to Mr. Peterson) That's-

Mr. Peterson: Um— I'd-

Gina: I don't know.

Mr. Peterson: I would put that with her just her appearance [i.e., with factual description]. Right. I don't want to make *too* much of the fact that it's-

Gina: (finishing his sentence) it's judgmental.

Mr. Peterson: (having a second thought) She looked juvenile, right? Put juvenile in quotes, see.

Gina: Uh huh.

Mr. Peterson: Right. Cause that's not- that *is* judgmental in a way. . . . See what I mean?

What's going on in this short exchange? At first Gina fully believes that everything Pip says about the Hubbles is his opinion. When she begins the conversation with Mr. Peterson she is emphatic in this belief, even though, as she says, other people might not agree with her. In short, she is committed to her own perspective. But the exchange gives Gina a new framework for reading about the Hubbles. It is Mr. Peterson's oral reading that sets up this framework—and sets Gina up with an entry to viewing text content with new skill—as he focuses on an obviously factual detail, that Mrs. Hubble is curly-haired. We see Gina ease rapidly into this new perspective as, with Mr. Peterson as audience to her own oral reading, she discovers another fact, that Mrs. Hubble wears a sky-blue outfit. With a new joint perspective, Gina and Mr. Peterson, now together, ponder over another description that seems to both of them to be less clear-cut, that Mrs. Hubble holds "a conventionally juvenile position." Their conversation provides an opportunity for Mr. Peterson to muse aloud—the statement is not really opinion, or as he says "judgmental," but then again it is rather judgmental in a way, so if Gina decides to use that description about the Hubbles in her paragraph she should put it in quotes to indicate its coming from Pip's point of view. Through the push and pull of this short exchange, Gina and Mr. Peterson simultaneously read the book, read the writing assignment, and read each other, revising their "readings" along the way. As conversation unfolds, so does the lesson, and gradually Gina's original belief that everything in *Great Expectations* is only Pip's opinion comes to be modified as she and Mr. Peterson both discover where to distinguish opinion from fact. On this premise Gina can write her paragraph, which is to say, she can slip from her role as reader of other's text to writer of her own, still sorting fact from opinion in the process, with the new perspective gained from her talk with Mr. Peterson. It is perhaps not surprising that in the paragraph she produces about the Hubbles, she is careful to mark her opinions about them much as she had discussed with Mr. Peterson in this conversation. She puts questionable statements in quotation marks and introduces one of them with a disclaiming, "This is purely my opinion":

> Mr. and Mrs. Hubble are very conservative and dignified people. In the story, both Hubbles are ranked highly in society. Although they are not rich, they are still considered respectable people by all. They, like most conservatives, are not ones to present a subject, instead they wait for one to be brought up and mainly support it by adding their "two-cents worth." You could say they don't have a mind of their own. Neither one of them speaks very often, and when they do it is only to agree or to somehow add it to something someone said. This is true especially of Mr. Hubble who interpreted Mr. Wopsle's speech about the meaning of the pig, to the annoyance of Mrs. Wopsle. This is purely my opinion, but somehow I imagine them as "over-the-hill-snobs" if that makes any sense. . . .

Misa

Misa is characteristically an active participant in her conferences, and Mr. Peterson always feels comfortable talking to her. Unlike Gina, Misa frequently calls on Mr. Peterson in class (as she says, she "calls him over"), to consult with him about her writing. This occurs when she is working alone as well as when she is working with her peer group. She readily consults with him on a broad range of issues, from the pronunciation of words or use of synonyms to tactics for framing a yet-to-be-written essay. She appears to understand that he is a valuable resource, willing to be utilized.

One illustrative conference between Misa and Mr. Peterson lasts one minute, one second. Misa, like Gina, works with a small group of peers on the paragraph-long *Great Expectations* character-sketch. Misa's group is writing about the convict, and they have already produced first drafts of their paragraphs. These paragraphs have been guided in part by a pre-writing assignment for groups to collaborate on filling in a chart about their character, covering: (a) how he looks, including what he wears; (b) what his moves and mannerisms are; (c) what others say about him; (d) what he does; and (e) what he says. This information serves as material that each group member can draw on when writing her paragraph.

Misa's group responds to one another's paragraphs on the day first drafts are due. As they give one another feedback on the efficacy of their paragraphs' topic sentences and supporting evidence, a knotty problem surfaces for Misa, a problem that others in her group share: Misa is faced with reconciling what she has written in her paragraph, which centers on the convict's actions, with what she and the group collectively infer to be workable texts for this assignment—that is, if the chart is any indication, their paragraphs should probably cover looks as well as deeds. But the paragraph Misa has written, with a topic sentence that presents the convict as a "ruffian," makes no mention of the convict's appearance:

> The convict in the "Great Expectations" is a ruffian. He threatens Pip with a story he has made up to keep Pip under his thumb. For example, to ensure that Pip obeys his order to get him a file and some "wittles", he tells Pip that he has a young man with him who will tear out Pip's heart and liver if Pip betrays the convict in any way. In addition, the convict tells Pip that compare to the young man, the convict himself is an angel. When ever the convict questions Pip, he often stares hard into the boy's eyes and roughly grasping on Pip's limbs or clothing. For instance, the convict tilts Pip down time after time to glare at Pip until he promises to do as he orders. Also, when Pip informs the convict he has seen the young man. The convict seizes Pip by the collar and stares at him for further explainations.

When group members consider Misa's paragraph, they are concerned, first, that the topic sentence and supporting text work as a unit:

Student 1: But does everything lend to the topic sentence though?

Student 2: I think so.

Student 3: Well maybe you could add a little bit more to the topic sentence . . . like the cause and effect.

But when Misa tries to revise the topic sentence, she surfaces the unforeseen dilemma. Says Misa:

> How should I do it? Like (composes) "the convict in *Great Expectations* is a ruffian because of the way he acts and the way he's dressed"? Then I'd have to add, you know, how he is dressed (in her paragraph).

Misa suggests to her peers that she figure it out with Mr. Peterson. "Should I ask him?" she says. And she does. Without disengaging herself from her peers, she attracts Mr. Peterson's attention and begins a conversation:

> Mr. Peterson, does the discussion of the clothing he wears kind of contribute to the uhm the topic sentence? Do I have to add how he is dressed? Cause all I describe (now) is actions.

When Mr. Peterson answers that talking about the convict's clothing is probably not relevant to her paragraph, Misa utters a surprised "No?" which her peers echo. Refining Misa's topic sentence had raised a question for them that has as much to do with following what they perceive as "the assignment" (the chart) as it does with rhetorical choices. Misa's "No?" effectively forces Mr. Peterson to think more about the writing strategies—and assignment—under discussion. He ponders:

> Mr. Peterson: Well, you mean his dress.
>
> Misa: Yeah, the way he dresses.
>
> Mr. Peterson: Well, if you want to say he gives the *impression* of being a ruffian, see the difference?

Mr. Peterson is making a fine distinction here, but it is only on this distinction that clothing becomes relevant to Misa's paragraph. The rhetorical subtlety effectively steers Misa into deliberation:

> Misa: Like how he looks outwardly. But right now in the paragraph, all I'm trying to put is just his manner, just how he acts. That's it.

Mr. Peterson reasserts his original response to her, that dress, then, is "a little bit irrelevant." Misa responds, ending the exchange with her own summing up of how she will handle her draft:

> Ok. So I just leave it—the way it is.

Through this brief writing conference conversation, Misa has examined a rhetorical strategy that to her and to her peers had begun to look problematic in light of their reading of the assignment and to work through a solution that is, in fact, compatible with—and has the effect of confirming—her original plans.

On a micro scale, the ways in which the writing conference conversations between Mr. Peterson and Gina and Misa unfold might be likened to fine-tuned duets—two participants playing off one another such that the whole that results is something other than whatever the individuals would have produced working solo. I think, to push this metaphor a bit more, it would be helpful to pull back now from close analysis in order to find out from Mr. Peterson himself how he orchestrates such duets in the full ensemble of the classroom.

"PLANNING, TIMING, AND ORGANIZING ONESELF": NOTES FROM A CHAT WITH MR. PETERSON

Mr. Peterson puts talking one-to-one with his students "way up on top" as a way to help them learn to write—and refers to the "key elements to managing in-class conferences" as "planning, timing, and organizing oneself." Yet because he has limited amounts of time in which to converse with each student, he has adopted four strict strategies to make such conversation possible.

1. *He meets with students according to individual student need, giving up the neatness and symmetry of holding writing conferences with all students on a periodic and set schedule.* Mr. Peterson compares himself with one of his colleagues, who carefully meets with each student once during a semester—he has students "tabulate their errors" and meets with them "to try to get some of that stuff straightened out." Mr Peterson ironically muses, "I wish I were that orderly." Yet it seems beside the point of writing instruction to impose uniform "order" on a process that varies student to student.

2. *He meets with students many times a semester, often many times a week, creating multiple and variable opportunities in different classroom contexts for one-to-one interactions about writing.* Both he and his students have opportunities to initiate conversations, to talk during the planning of essays (as we saw with Mr. Peterson and Gina), to talk during the drafting or revising of them (as we saw with Mr. Peterson and Misa), to talk while the students meet in peer groups or when they work alone, to talk into conferences of four or five minutes, to confer briefly one day and continue conversation the next—in short, to allow the variability of the classroom context to provide opportunities for variability in the content and character of one-to-one talk.

3. *When he talks to students one-to-one, he gauges the other students' collective threshold for working alone or with peers and matches time periods for one-to-one talk with that threshold.* While Mr. Peterson talks with one student in conference, other students in this class are able to work at their desks or in groups for relatively long stretches of time—20 to 25 minutes or even more. But with a different class or in a different school where the students might not be so adaptable to this scheme, Mr. Peterson says that since "kids are okay with an activity for awhile—until they get restless," he would find their threshold—even if that threshold were 10 minutes or less. Which is to say, he would not give up writing conferences of the kind that occur in his classroom, even if it meant fitting them into shorter stretches of time.

4. *When papers are past first draft readings and it is he who initiates conferences on revision, he knows beforehand, before he talks to a student, what is most important for that student to discuss.* For example, he might initiate a conference just on a student's thesis statement, so he has to know that thesis statement before he and the student meet. For time spent in class conferring with students, time is spent out of class preparing to do so by reading and knowing each student's work.

IN CONCLUSION

Conversations of the kind that we have seen between Mr. Peterson and his students about their writing occur as part of the classroom buzz and seem rather unselfconsciously tucked into a long-term dialogue about writing that fits into the curriculum of a secondary school English class. In the two exchanges we witnessed, we see opportunities for participants to shape together an important process. The process includes:

- analyzing real-world or literate-world experience in order to render it in the world of a student's own evolving writing;
- analyzing real-world or literate-world experience as it appears (or as it might appear) in a student's own writing;
- negotiating between real-world or literate-world experience and a student's own written renditions;

- generalizing from the specifics of a student's own writing experience to more universal truths about her own writing process; and
- negotiating between teacher's and student's points of view, switching and comparing perspectives to find a creditable balance.

It is these extraordinaries that ask us to pay attention, that ask us to see "ordinary" and quickly fleeting conversations as critical events in the business of learning to write.

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